

## Women Leaders of Higher Education: Female Executives in Leading Universities in China

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### Abstract

Nowadays it is common for women to serve as university presidents and other high-level officials. Many women undertake leadership of universities, shouldering the important responsibilities of managing universities and promoting the construction and development of these institutions. This article investigates the female leaders in 38 leading universities in China. Leaders in the study are defined as presidents, vice-presidents, party secretaries and deputy party secretaries, as executive leaders and party leaders have similar ranks and authority within universities in China. By investigating their personal characteristics, this article draws an overall portrait of female leaders in leading universities in China. They are on average 54 years old, have high educational and academic achievement, are promoted principally from internal channels, most of them are deputies, and women on higher positions are more likely on the party track rather than the executive track. This article also discusses the role of female leaders in the field of higher education.

**Key words:** Female; Leaders; Universities

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### INTRODUCTION

Viewed globally, a new historical period has emerged in which women have raised social awareness of their status

and increased their social participation. Many women have gained prominence, and the appearance of a female president of a nation, prime minister, chief executive officer, or university president is no longer unfamiliar. Many women are now active in politics, economics, education, and culture, demonstrating their unique style of management.

Contemporary management studies confirm the unique advantages of female leadership. The superiority of female management style is closely related with women's natural instincts (Mintzberg, Simons, & Basu, 2002). Helgesen believes that women are effective leaders; they possess a novel and unique vision that encourages transformation. In addition, women have unique working skills, ideas, attitudes, and modes and the ability to lead organizational reform to adapt to the demands of the new economic era (Helgesen, 1990). Compared with the male management style, women generally have stronger communication, cooperation, and mobilization skills. Women have especially solid abilities to handle work goals, the treatment of specific affairs, and the management of interpersonal relations (Claes, 1999). Some scholars assert that female leaders have unique, gender-based management advantages in language, social activity, thought, and endurance that cannot otherwise be replicated in management (Hossain, Paul, & Barry, 2010).

Since the twenty-first century, the governments of many countries have adopted policies to improve the status and participation of female managers. In June 2011, Belgium's Parliament passed a law stipulating that women should hold at least 30% of seats on the boards of directors for public enterprises and listed companies (Rohner & Dougan, 2012). In 2002, Mexico's Federal Election Campaign Act catalyzed a great transformation, requiring political party to maintain a quota of 30% for female candidates (Davison & Burke, 2013). The *Chinese Women's Development Plan (2011–2020)* issued by the State Council proposed a similar mission, objectives, and measures aiming to promote women's participation in

decision-making and management in various fields in the new century (The State Council of the People's Republic of China, 2011). In this era, female leaders have become an importance force which cannot be ignored.

Although the status of female leaders has risen, significant gender gap exists. Figure 1 shows the proportion of women in the labor force and senior management in Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) countries and in emerging economies; gender differences are evident in these 40 countries. In OECD countries, women make up 45% of the labor force on average but only approximately 30% of senior managers (including senators, senior officials and managers) (OECD, 2012). Catalyst, a nonprofit organization expanding opportunities for women and business, issued a report in 2012 entitled *Global Comparison of Female Participation in Management* which investigated female participation in national political management positions and leadership in public institutions in 46 countries and the seven major regions of the world (Catalyst, 2012). The report indicates that, on average, women's participation rate in politics is approximately 30% and varies greatly among countries and regions. In Oceania, North America, Latin America, and Europe, women's rate of participation in politics is relatively high, ranging from 30% to 40%, but it is relatively low, around 10%, in the Middle East and Africa, except for South Africa. The countries of Asia differ greatly. The Philippines have the highest rate, 54.8%, and is the only country in which the rate is more than half. Qatar has the lowest rate at 6.9%.

Why are female leaders indispensable but insufficiently represented? Many scholars have attempted to explain this phenomenon by pointing to the obstacles to women's career development. The glass ceiling theory precisely describes the subtle obstacles against women's career development. Two *Wall Street Journal* reporters first used the term "glass ceiling" in 1986 referring to the invisible obstacles for women to obtain higher positions in companies in the United States (Sheng, 2009). Nowadays, scholars mainly use this term to describe the intangible challenges that women encounter when seeking promotions (Federal Glass Ceiling Commission, 1995). Women seem to be only one short step away from success; however, these obstacles make it difficult for them to ascend to the peak of their career path.

The glass ceiling exists not only in all career fields but also in a variety of manifestations in numerous areas of women's lives. Female leaders face obstacles pursuing employment in higher education. However, a large group of university female leaders have successfully overcome these obstacles in recent years. The Ivy League in the United States has seen six female presidents: Judith Rodin, former president of the University of Pennsylvania; Amy Gutmann, president of the University of Pennsylvania; Ruth Simmons, former president of Brown University;

Christina Hull Paxson, president of Brown University; Shirley M. Tilghman, president of Princeton University; and Drew Gilpin Faust, president of Harvard University.

In China, educator Wu Yifang took up the post of the president at Jinling College in 1928 and became the first female university president in Chinese history. However, the rate of female university presidents has always been low in China. In 2007, the research group "Research on the University Presidents in China" at Renmin University of China found that women occupied the position of president at merely 4.5% of 1,792 colleges and universities (Yang, 2008).

As women break through the glass ceiling and enter the ranks of the elite, the proportion of high-level female leaders in Chinese higher education is still not high compared to other fields and to higher education in other countries. Therefore, the authors seek to answer the following question: What are the common characteristics of the women who have overcome obstacles and achieved success in the higher education?

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## 1. POPULATION UNDER STUDY

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The group characteristics and background of university leaders have long attracted attention from scholars and concerned institutions internationally. For example, the American Council on Education conducted seven studies on university presidents throughout the United States from 1986 to 2010. The results from 2001 indicated that the on average university president is 57 years old, white, and male; holds a doctorate degree; and had teaching or administrative experience in academia before promotion (Corrigan, 2002). Studies on this topic at Chinese universities began relatively late, and the available data are limited.

This article focuses on high-level female leaders at universities under the 985 Program in China. Program 985 is a national plan aimed at supporting, in cooperation with local government, a number of top universities to become outstanding world-wide. The participating universities in the Program 985 are considered to have the highest prestige in China. Among the 39 universities participating in this program, the National University of Defense Technology is excluded from this study because its military setting for university leaders is different from that of other universities. This study defines leaders as university presidents, (standing) vice presidents, party secretaries and (standing) deputy party secretaries. Leaders from both the executive track (presidents and vice presidents) and the party track (party secretaries and deputy party secretaries) are chosen because in Chinese universities these two groups of leaders have similar ranks and authority. This article provides detailed statistics on the characteristics of female leaders at the 38 universities under study. All data were drawn from public materials of these universities.

The paper utilized curriculum vitae method to uncover leaders' personal details. The Georgia Institute

of Technology in the United States developed this methodology for the scientific research project Research Value Mapping (Canibano, & Bozeman, 2009). In this method, personal curriculum vitae are treated as data sources, and the personal information contained in them is coded and analyzed according to the descriptive statistical analysis method. This method analyzes individuals' career development path, professional characteristics, mobilizing mode, and personal and organizational evaluations of their skills. The present study identified 12 items in six categories that describe the professional characteristics of female leaders at the universities under study, as shown in Table 1.

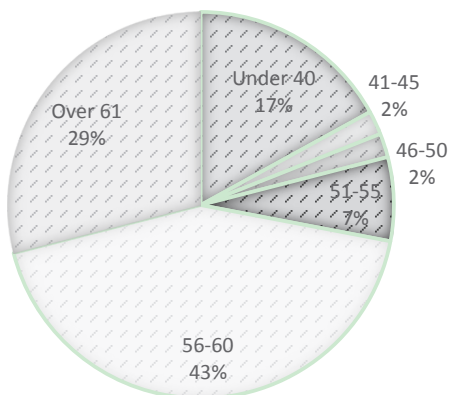
**Table 1 Curriculum Vitae Information of High-level Female Leaders**

Basic information	University, name, position, age
Academic degree	PhD-holder, university for PhD
Academic background	Professorship, academician, organization for academician membership
International experience	International experience
Professional background	Working experience
Promotion mode	Internal promotion to external hire to the current position

As of February 15, 2013, there were 45 female leaders at the 38 universities. Data on three female leaders could not be obtained; therefore, this study includes 42 female leaders at 38 universities.

## 2. OVERALL PORTRAIT OF FEMALE LEADERS

The portraits of the 42 female leaders in this study present many similarities, including the following common characteristics.



**Figure 1 Age Range of Female Leaders**

### 2.1 Age

As shown in Figure 1, the average age of the 42 female leaders is 54, while the average age of the principal

leaders (president or party secretary) is 62. Of the 42 female leaders, one is younger than 40 years old, one is between 41 and 45 years old, seven between 46 and 50 years old, 12 between 51 and 55 years old, 18 between 56 and 60 years old, and three older than 61.

In late October 2007, Renmin University's research group of "Research on the University Presidents in China" investigated the characteristics of university presidents throughout the country and reported that the average age of the (principal) presidents of 985 Program institutions was 55.1. In March 2010, the research group investigated the same group of 985 Program colleges and universities and found an average age of 55.4 (Zhan, 2011), which matched the average age of the 42 female leaders. However, the average age of women in principal position was 7.6 years higher than the average age of university presidents in China.

### 2.2 Educational Background

Female leaders of leading universities generally have a background in higher education and academia. Among the 42 women, 24, or 57%, hold a PhD degree, including three who graduated from overseas universities. Twenty-seven, or 64%, are professors, and 18 have served as visiting scholars abroad. Two are academicians, one with the International College of Dentists and the other with the Chinese Academy of Sciences and Third World Academy of Sciences.

In addition, there are certain structural differences in the educational and academic backgrounds of female leaders; generally, educational and academic background of administrative leaders is higher than that of party leaders. Among the 24 female leaders who have PhD, two-thirds are executive leaders as presidents or vice presidents, and of the 27 professors, 16 are also executive leaders.

There also exists a gap in the educational and academic backgrounds and the internationalization level of female leaders and the presidents of 985 Program universities. In 2011, a study investigated the academic background of the presidents in 115 universities in the 211 Plan and found that most of them had science and engineering background and were PhD student supervisors. Among the 39 colleges and universities in the 985 Program, the presidents all have doctoral degrees, are professors, and 17 presidents are academicians (Guo, Sun, & Huang, 2012). In 2010, the "Research on the University Presidents in China" research group reached similar results and concluded that 81.1% of university presidents have overseas study experience (Zhan, 2011).

### 2.3 Proportion in Leadership

Women account for a relatively low proportion of high-level leaders at universities. On average, each of these institutions has 10 to 13 leaders, which include usually only one or two women, many have no women leaders at all. The 38 universities under study have 448 leaders, of

whom only 45, or 10%, are women. In addition, there are no women among the leadership at eight universities.

The operation and management of universities are similar to that of enterprises. A study by McKinsey, a global management consulting firm that focuses on solving issues of concern to senior management, found that a certain proportion of women are needed to have a positive impact on a board of directors. In a large-scale enterprise with 8 to 10 directors, the top management team needs three or more female directors to significantly enhance the enterprise's performance (Desvaux, Devillard-Hoellinger, & Baumgarten, 2007, p.12). Scholars with the Canadian Conference Board arrived at a similar conclusion (Brown, Brown, & Anastasopoulos, 2002).

According to the 2012 *Annual Report of University Presidents in the U.S.* issued by the American Council on Education, the proportion of female presidents at universities (all public and private universities that confer doctor's, master's, and bachelor's degrees) in the U.S.

increased from 23% in 2006 to 26% 2011 (Cook & Kim, 2012). While women and men hold an equal number of presidencies at Ivy League universities in the U.S., women hold no more than 7% of the presidencies (including party secretaries) and 10% of senior leadership positions at the 38 universities under study.

## 2.4 Deputy and Full Positions

Among the senior leadership ranks, women occupy more deputy-level positions than principal ones. In absolute numbers, the 42 female executive leaders at 985 Program institutions include one president, four party secretaries, and together only five in principal positions, accounting for 11.9% of female executive leaders. In contrast, women hold 37 deputy-level positions—20 vice presidents and 17 deputy party secretaries—making up nearly 90% of all female leaders. In relative quantities, at the 38 universities, women occupy no more than 7% of principal positions and nearly 10% of deputy-level positions.

**Table 2**  
**Position Distribution of Female Executive Leaders in Leading Universities in China**

Position	President	Party secretary	Vice president	Deputy Party secretary	Total
Number of women	1	4	20	17	42
Proportion of female leaders under study	2.38%	9.52%	47.62%	40.48%	100%
Proportion of all leaders	6.57%		9.94%		9.37%

Men hold an absolute advantage in the number of leadership positions at 985 Program universities, especially at the principal level where on average only one leader in 15 is female. The distribution of position and power reveals that, although women's status has been given more attention and many women have become university leaders, vertical segregation of power makes it difficult for women to occupy the top of the decision-making level.

## 2.5 Party and Executive Tracks

The posts of party secretaries and deputy party secretaries are held by a relatively higher proportion of women, compared to the posts of presidents and vice presidents. In China university leadership offices can be divided into two tracks, one group consists of the party secretaries and deputy secretaries. The other group is made of administrators, including the university president and vice presidents. The leadership teams of 985 Program universities have on average of 12 people. Of the 42 female leaders of the 38 universities researched, 21, or half, are on the party track, and the other half on the executive track. However, of the 38 universities, there were only one female president compared to four female party secretaries, showing that at the very top, women are more likely to take the party posts instead of the executive posts.

In Chinese universities, executive leaders handle all the internal and external aspects of development. Although the Party Committee is in charge of the overall direction, strategy and fundamental mission of universities, the committees, in actual practice, are more engaged in leading thinking and monitoring the implementation of significant decision and issues, rather than day to day management. Party committees' more day-to-day and specific responsibilities are focused more on the supervision of labor unions, discipline, supervisory control, auditing, consolidation, and retirement. Therefore, in the universities under study where the highest-ranked officials are women, the female leaders are more likely in charge of the party whereas men are more likely in charge of daily university management.

## 2.6 Path of Promotion

Academic titles and educational level are important conditions for a woman to become a university leader but not the key factor determining position. Working experience seems to have a stronger influence on the promotion and development of female leaders. Of the 42 female leaders, 35 were promoted internally and had been leaders at school or departmental level at their universities, while only 7 were recruited externally. Of the five women promoted to principal positions, four were recruited externally with previous working experience at government departments and institutions related to education.



The new trend in higher education in China for the principal positions are to have external hires, perhaps this method is convenient for university reform, as leaders hired externally are less subject to universities' historic traditions and thought, and can broaden the institutions' vision and help the institutions adapt to the demand of the times (Yu & Tian, 2012). Although internal promotion remains the main mode of promotion for senior female leaders in the 985 Program universities, diverse working experience has become a new appealing factor for leaders at universities facing global competition. Women in deputy-level positions who want to move into principal positions should gain diverse, professional working experience and adopt a transformative mode of thinking.

### 3. DISCUSSION

The issues relevant to women's participation in management has shifted from the early discussions about gender equality to women's professional value and contribution, which are related to women's individual efforts and inseparable from their gender-based characteristics. The selection and appointment of female leaders in universities is significant for society, universities, and women themselves.

a. Selecting and appointing women to management roles in university is needed for social equality and balanced development. In 1995, the United Nations' 4th World Conference on Women's Issues issued the landmark *Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action* that declared that, improving the status of women and realizing the equality of men and women is the condition of human rights and social justice, the empowerment of women and equality of men and women are the prerequisites for people all over the world to realize the guarantee on politics, society, economy, culture and environment. Women leaders in university are an important part of administration and a powerful force for building a harmonious, socialist society. The selection and training of female leaders in universities have great significance for the implementation of the national policy of equality between men and women, the improvement of women's political status, and the promotion of women's career development.

b. Women in senior leadership roles at universities help to play the role of female human resources and promote diverse leadership. Literature suggests that the empowerment of female leaders is beneficial and essential to the improvement of organizational productivity and development of human resources (Cheung & Halpern, 2010). In addition, researchers have found that individual's productivity is higher on a diverse team than in a single, homogeneous group because a diverse team can propose more effective solutions to questions (Phillips & Loyd, 2006). Female leaders are good at making use of personal charms to

communicate, coordinate with, and guide subordinates to dedicate themselves to realizing organizational targets and personal goals (Rosener, 1990). Female leaders also considerate and apply their special skills and appeal to the management of universities. Women university leaders, then, can both promote the diversification of the decision-making level and interject more humanitarian perspectives into the decision-making process and fully exercise their advantages in human resources to promote the cultural construction of university.

c. The inclusion of women in university leadership posts will facilitate their growth as a group in higher education and create a model for women's career development. Holmgren, the former vice provost of Princeton University and former president of Mills College, thinks that female presidents themselves bear the responsibility of improving women's status in universities. She thinks that a university presidency is the ideal position from which women can effect change to create real gender equality on their campus and contribute to women's pursuit for equality in the larger higher education field (Holmgren, 2000). The colleges and universities in the 985 Program represent the top level of higher education in China and are models from which other schools can imitate and learn. The selection and appointment of female leaders at such institutions will promote female leadership across the field of education, encourage professional women to break through the glass ceiling, and spread the influence of women leaders.

### CONCLUSION

Compared to foreign countries, the proportion of female leaders in China's higher education field is still low, and their status and dilemma have not been given enough attention. Therefore, all circles of society need to consider female leadership in order to break away from traditional ideas, accurately evaluate women's abilities and contributions, increase the opportunity for women at universities, and improve their status in universities' management teams.

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